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EDITORIAL / EDITORIALE

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In the summer of 2014 the University of St Andrews hosted a conference convened by the editors entitled, *Ancient Readers and Their Scriptures*. Contributions explored various topics relating to the ways in which the Hebrew Bible was read, interpreted, reworked, and transmitted in antiquity. The following essays represent a thematically coherent cross-section of the contributions to the conference that focuses specifically on the ways that early Torah traditions – in this case, the creation accounts, the legend of Melchizidek, the *Akedah*, and the exodus event – were read and understood in antiquity from Ben Sira to early Christianity. The articles reinforce the fact that the text of the Torah and traditions pertaining to its interpretation remained central features of literary composition and exegetical reflection in Early Judaism and Christianity.

Our collection begins with the essay by Jessi Orpana, who examines the use and interpretation of an underappreciated tradition in Ben Sira – creation – focusing on Genesis 1-3 and other material from the Hebrew Bible. She argues that the allusive handling of these traditions in Ben Sira represents a new creative endeavour, one that is partly a distillation of pre-existing interpretive traditions. In this way, Ben Sira acts as an innovative scribe.

In Tavis Bohlinger's essay he offers a thorough survey of the explicit and implicit references/allusions in Pseudo-Philo's *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* (*L.A.B.*) to the famous scene of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 (the *Akedah*). Bohlinger's essay shows how the narrative of the binding of Isaac even influenced the way that Pseudo-Philo retells and expands upon other portions of the Hebrew Bible.

Beate Kowalski explores the reuse of Exodus traditions in the book of Revelation, identifying the author's numerous allusions to Israel's decisive event and examining them in light of the larger theological and social reality that the Apocalypse addresses. Ultimately, Kowalski argues that the *Dreizeitenformel* (Exod 3:14) is an interpretive key to understanding the Apocalypse and its message in regard to how the faithful ought to react in the face of an oppressive Roman government and ideology.

The volume concludes with an article from Kasper Dalgaard that addresses the ways in which the figure of Melchizidek was understood within a specific branch of early Christianity. In particular, Dalgaard analyzes how the function of the figure of Melchizidek in the *Books of Jeu* and *Pistis Sophia* reflects the hermeneutics and distinct reading strategies of the authors and redactors of these works.

TRANSMISSION AND REINTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURAL IMAGERY AND TRADITIONS ON THE CREATION OF HUMANITY IN THE BOOK OF BEN SIRA

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The book of Ben Sira is one of the best-preserved and most thoroughly studied wisdom texts from the late Second Temple period. It is generally supposed that Jesus ben Sira, a wisdom teacher in the early second century BCE, composed this work.[1] This dating of the book is widely accepted by scholars, relying on the information provided in the prologue of the book in its Greek translation, and several clues to the writer's historical context in the book itself.[2] The original language of the book was Hebrew, but it is completely extant only in translations, the most important of which is the Greek version.[3]

The book of Ben Sira is a collection of wisdom admonitions and speeches dealing with a number of different themes relating to a number of topics, including God, creation, the means of acquiring true wisdom, the Torah and other ancestral traditions, as well as the complexities of human life and mortality. Due to this mixture of different themes, and their discussion from various angles, the book is not always entirely coherent in its formulations of these matters. Consequently, seemingly inconsistent ideas frequently coexist side by side.[4] Therefore, in order to better understand the book of Ben

[*] The research carried out for this study and the writing of this article were funded by The Academy of Finland's Center of Excellence: Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions (CSTT).

[1] For a bibliography of works on Ben Sira up to 1998, see F.V. Reiterer (ed.), *Bibliographie zu Ben Sira* (BZAW 266; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), and for major studies since then, see the helpful annotated bibliography by Jeremy Corley at www.bensira.org.

[2] For the precise dating of the Book of Ben Sira, see D.S. Williams, "The Date of Ecclesiasticus," *VT* 44 (1994), pp. 563–566; Johannes Marböck, "Sirach/Sirachbuch," in J. Marböck (ed.), *Weisheit und Frömmigkeit: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Literatur der Spätzeit* (ÖBS 29; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 15-29.

[3] For the Hebrew text of Ben Sira, see, for example, P.C. Beentjes, *"Happy the One who Meditates on Wisdom" (Sir. 14,20) Collected Essays on the Book of Ben Sira* (CBE 43; Leuven: Peeters, 2006), pp. 283-374. For the different versions, see J.-S. Rey - J. Joosten (eds.), *The Texts and Version of the Book of Ben Sira: Transmission and Interpretation* (JSJSup 150; Leiden: Brill, 2011), and for the Greek translation in particular, see J. Ziegler, *Sapientia Iesu Filii Sirach. Septuaginta* (VTG 12/2; 2d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980); Benjamin G. Wright, "Sirach," in A. Pietersma - B.G. Wright (eds.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 715-762.

[4] Cf. A. Di Lella and P.W. Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes* (AB 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 4, 10.

Sira and its aims, it is necessary to investigate in detail the variety of ways earlier texts and traditions are used in this composition.[5] When reading Ben Sira, it becomes evident that its author was a well-educated scribe who had a wide-ranging knowledge of different cultures and writings.[6] One aspect of the book of Ben Sira relating closely to the author's selection and use of earlier traditions that has not been properly emphasized in earlier studies is that many of the dominant themes are closely linked with matters of everyday life. The discussion of these themes is most of all meant to explain to the book's perceived audience and readers things that one is bound to face as a human being, such as, mortality and the inevitable death of all humans.[7]

This study focuses specifically on the use of diverse imagery connected with the creation of humanity in the book of Ben Sira in order to provide a glimpse of the author's use of earlier traditions in connection with one specific tradition. The use of creation traditions in Ben Sira has seldom been of special interest to scholars, perhaps partly because there are no explicit quotations of Genesis in Ben Sira,[8] but rather a great number of allusions to different traditions, which are more elusive to discover and analyze. Shane Berg's article is a recent endeavor to cover part of this gap in scholarship,[9] but it only examines the parts in Ben Sira connected with the Law. Moreover, by concentrating rather strictly on Genesis, he misses some of the other sources employed by Ben Sira in these passages. At least partly due to this emphasis on Genesis, Berg places too much weight on Ben Sira as an inventor of specific trends that on closer inspection were at least implicitly present already in earlier traditions. Thus, in this investigation special attention will be paid to the selective manner in which Ben Sira reuses and reinterprets creation traditions now included in the Hebrew Bible, and to situating his work in the larger discourse of his time by noting similarities to compositions from the same general time period. Ben Sira's selectiveness provides important evidence about the different issues and aspects that he emphasized, downplayed, or even dismissed altogether. This usage of creation traditions can then be used in future studies as evidence for the different mechanics Ben Sira employed when combining different earlier traditions. Thus, it can pave a way for a more nuanced understanding of Ben Sira as an author and hence help to perceive more profoundly the aims of the book itself.

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[5] For Ben Sira's use of earlier traditions in general, see, for instance, B.G. Wright, "Biblical Interpretation in Ben Sira," in M. Henze (ed.), *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 361–386.

[6] See further M. Marttila, *Foreign Nations in the Wisdom of Ben Sira: A Jewish Sage between Opposition and Assimilation* (DCLS 13; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

[7] Such themes are generally emphasized in wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs, Job, 4QInstruction).

[8] M. Gilbert, "Ben Sira, Reader of Genesis 1-11," in J. Corley - V. Skemp (eds.), *Intertextual Studies in Ben Sira and Tobit. Essays in Honor of A. Di Lella, O. F. M.* (CBQMS 38; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2005), pp. 89-90.

[9] S. Berg, "Ben Sira, the Genesis Creation Accounts, and the Knowledge of God's Will," *JBL* 132 (2013), pp. 139-157.

Creation imagery and traditions are particularly prominent in Ben Sira 15, 17, 33, 40, and 41. In these passages Ben Sira used creation imagery derived mainly from Genesis 1-3, but supplemented with ideas found in other parts of Genesis, Isaiah, Job, Proverbs, Psalms, and Qohelet. Instead of long direct quotations from or allusions to these earlier texts and traditions, expressions and imagery related to the creation are used in a more implicit fashion without necessarily referring explicitly to its original context.[10] Nevertheless, it is obvious that Ben Sira used a great number of earlier traditions in order to formulate his own distinct perspective on specific themes. Due to this use of varied traditions, the possibility is taken seriously in this study that only a very limited number of cases where Ben Sira refers to the creation of humanity actually reflect Ben Sira's own innovations.[11] It will be argued that he makes some new combinations of traditional themes, but that he does not create these ideas *ex nihilo*. Rather these passages in Ben Sira should be understood as a synthesis of earlier traditions and contemporary thoughts that emerged through selective reuse and reinterpretation of earlier texts and traditions.[12]

This investigation proceeds by first presenting an analysis of different themes related to the concept of what it is to be a human in the Hebrew book of Ben Sira, supplemented where necessary with the Greek version.[13] Ben

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[10] In this respect the book of Ben Sira resembles the reuse of earlier traditions in other poetic texts. Even though allusions, rather than quotations, are frequently used in poetic texts, they are still employed by the authors of the later texts to bring the used passages into a meaningful discussion with their own views. For this kind of usage, see for example, G.J. Brooke, "Biblical Interpretation in the Qumran Scrolls and the New Testament," in L. Schiffman - E. Tov, - J.C. VanderKam (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after Their Discovery: Proceedings of the Jerusalem Congress, July 20-25, 1997* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), p. 67; A. Berlin, "Qumran Laments and the Study of Lament Literature," in E.G. Chazon - R.R. Clements - A. Pinnick (eds.), *Liturgical Perspectives: Prayer and Poetry in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Proceedings of the Fifth International Symposium of the Orion Center, 19-23 January 2000* (STDJ 48; Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 1-17; M.S. Pajunen, *The Land to the Elect and Justice for All: Reading Psalms in the Dead Sea Scrolls in Light of 4Q381* (JAJSup 14; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), p. 47.

[11] There are a significant number of studies written on Ben Sira. The themes that have received the most scholarly attention in the past decades are the election of Israel, humanity's free will, obedience to the Law, knowledge of the will of God, and various linguistic aspects of the book. In these studies Ben Sira is often stated to be an innovative scribe who created both linguistic and theological novelties; see, e.g., Berg, "Ben Sira, the Genesis Creation Accounts," pp. 140, 143, 157. However, in many cases this kind of view is too simple, and this issue should be discussed in a more nuanced way as a creative dialogue with many different earlier traditions as well as contemporary views. See also Di Lella and Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, pp. 40-45.

[12] It is not crucial for the purposes of this study to always trace the origin of the imagery narrowly back to any one passage or source. The imagery and ideas associated with the creation of humanity are not typically tied to one composition, but rather should be seen as general interests and therefore widely influential as can be seen, for instance, in the frequent use of different metaphors relating to human mortality in the Psalms. Since tracing direct textual dependences is not the objective of this investigation, the question of the precise dating of the books now in the Hebrew Bible may be left largely un-discussed.

[13] The primary source for this study is the Hebrew version of Ben Sira, which is partly

Sira's transmission and reinterpretation of scriptural traditions concerning the creation of humanity is firmly tied to several prominent themes and will hence be presented here in accordance with these themes: the character of humanity as a species, the acquisition of wisdom, and mortality. This analysis will be followed by a short discussion about the implications of the results of this study for understanding the use of creation imagery in Ben Sira. It will be shown that the creation imagery derived from earlier traditions concerning the creation of humanity is constructed and used in the book of Ben Sira as an instrument, together with other traditions, such as Stoic philosophy, in presenting an overall portrait of what it means to be a human being.[14]

1. *The Basic Nature of the Created Human Being*

Some of the main features of Ben Sira's representation of humanity have their roots in Genesis traditions of the creation. This can be seen, for instance, in his description of humanity in Sir 17:1-8. However, as is well known, the two Genesis creation accounts and the Eden narratives present only a very limited description of what kind of creature the human being truly is. This should come as no surprise since the early chapters of Genesis were not meant to answer all the questions that have later been posed to them. This limited amount of information provided by the Genesis accounts is important because it made it necessary for later authors to use a wider variety of sources to formulate concepts and issues prevalent in their own times. One example of such paucity in the Genesis narratives are the origins of angels and demons that are in later texts developed by taking into account a number of other traditions and interpreting specific passages in Genesis 1 and 6 through them.

Similarly to Ben Sira, other roughly contemporary texts, such as, *Jubilees*, 4Q*Non-Canonical Psalms B* I, and the *Song of the Three Young Men* also utilize Gen 1-2 as their starting point, which is then supplemented with concepts derived from other texts or representing the authors own formulations and thus their own particular emphasis. *Jubilees* adds the creation of angels to the events of the first day (*Jub*. 2:2) by interpreting their creation as part of creating the heaven, and possibly also taking into account earlier sources that already implicitly contain the creation of angels and heaven together,

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preserved in several different manuscripts from Masada and the Qumran Caves. Longer exemplars are only extant from medieval times. For the Hebrew text, see P.C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of all Extant Hebrew MSS and A Synopsis of all Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts* (VTSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 1997). Unfortunately, the Hebrew text is not extant in all parts of Ben Sira important for this study, such as Sir 17, and furthermore, there are frequently major differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions. Thus, this study has also made use of the edition of the Greek text of Ben Sira provided by Ziegler, *Sapientia*.

[14] For connections between the book of Ben Sira and Stoic philosophy see, e.g. U. Wicke-Reuter, *Göttliche Providenz und menschliche Verantwortung bei Ben Sira und in der frühen Stoa* (BZAW 298; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000).

such as Ps 104:1-4. 4Q*Non-Canonical Psalms* B is one of a number of texts representing humanity as God's chosen species at creation (cf. 1Q34). This view is based on God's promises to humanity in Gen 1:26-28 and its juxtaposition with similar promises about land, dominion, and sustenance made to the people of Israel in other Pentateuchal narratives.[15] The *Song of the Three Young Men* in turn takes up a number of different traditions present most of all in Psalms in order to connect natural phenomena with angels.[16] Regardless of such varied use of sources in these and other compositions from the late Second Temple period, the Genesis accounts typically provided the primary background in all these later traditions from which further interpretations concerning the origins of the world and humanity could then branch off. Therefore, it is useful to highlight in the following the main features of the basic nature of humanity as it was construed in Genesis before continuing with Ben Sira's use of these concepts.

According to the first creation account in Genesis 1, humanity is created in the image of God, male and female, and they are given the dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:26-27). After this God blesses them and says to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28).[17] The subsequent second creation account (Genesis 2) gives some additional information concerning the origins of humanity. Gen 2:7 reads "Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." And slightly later it is stated that "the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man." (Gen 2:21-22). Thus, Genesis 1-2 offers a basic image of humanity as the pinnacle of creation that was given the mandate to rule all else. This was the basic image of humanity that was then adopted and modified by later authors, such as Ben Sira, in their own works dealing with questions concerning creation or the nature of humanity.

2. *Humanity and Wisdom*

In formulating his ideas concerning humanity, Ben Sira made use of a technique that combines wisdom thinking and the general theological concept of the divine order of creation (e.g., Sir 33:14-15).[18] This combination

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[15] Pajunen, *The Land*, pp. 143-171, 300-303.

[16] See R. Sollamo, "The Creation of Angels and Natural Phenomena Intertwined in the Book of Jubilees (4QJub[a]): Angels and Natural Phenomena as Characteristics of the Creation Stories and Hymns in Late Second Temple Judaism," in C. Hempel - J.M. Lieu (eds.), *Biblical Traditions in Transmission: Essays in Honour of Michael A. Knibb* (JSJSup 111; Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 273-290.

[17] All English translations of the Hebrew Bible in this article are according to NRSV, and the translations of the Greek passages follow NETS.

[18] Cf. Berg, "Ben Sira," p. 143.

is perceivable in such texts as Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 that list the different things created by God and their purposes in the ordering of the natural world. That is to say that God has created everything so that there is a perfect balance and harmony in the world. Later accounts of creation frequently elaborated upon the lists of the creative works of God in Genesis 1, mainly adding things absent from the Genesis account, such as the creation of angels (cf. Ps 104:2-4, *Jub*. 2:2, and Sg Three 1:36-38). Likewise, Sir 1:4 supplements the picture provided in Genesis by emphasizing that Wisdom as a sentient entity was created first. Consequently Wisdom could play an active role already in the act of creation itself.[19] Similar ideas were at least implicitly present already in Job and Proverbs. For instance, wisdom is conceived of as a product of God's initial act of creation is suggested by Job 28:27 ("Then [God] saw [wisdom] and declared it; he established it, and searched it out"). A similar sentiment is even more unambiguously expressed in Prov 8:22 ("The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago"). Furthermore, the LXX version of Prov 8:22 makes God's creation of Wisdom even more explicit with its use of κτίζω: κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ ("The Lord created me as the beginning of his ways, for the sake of his works").[20] Thus, Ben Sira did not create the idea of primordial Wisdom, but combined views present in his sources to form an image fitting his own perception of this matter.

What is particularly significant in Ben Sira when it comes to the creation of humanity is that, according to Ben Sira 17, humanity was created as God's image and given the knowledge and ability to reason already in creation.[21] With these gifts humanity is expected to succeed in its dominion over all the other creatures (Sir 17:2-8).[22] This reinterpretation of the creation of humanity is especially significant for the way in which the gaining of knowledge is treated in Ben Sira in comparison to Genesis 3. Knowledge is introduced in Genesis quite late in the Eden narrative, and then only as gaining the knowledge of good and evil rather than overall knowledge/wisdom. Contrary to the Genesis account, knowledge in Ben Sira is explicitly introduced as

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[19] For a succinct and helpful treatment of the citations and allusions in Sir 1:1-10, see Di Lella and Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, pp. 137-139. For a discussion on the prominence of Wisdom in Sir 1:1-10, see also Beentjes, "*Happy the One,"* pp. 19-34.

[20] For Ben Sira's (Sir 1:4-9) use of Prov 8:22 and Job 28:27, see Beentjes, *"Happy the One,"* pp. 30-33; G.S. Goering, *Wisdom's Root Revealed: Ben Sira and the Election of Israel* (JSJSup 139; Leiden: Brill, 2009); Berg, "Ben Sira," p. 142.

[21] The brief narration concerning the creation of humanity in 17:1-5 not only incorporates elements of both creation accounts in Genesis, but in a most subtle fashion also draws material from Genesis 3 and 6. See further Berg, "Ben Sira," p. 146.

[22] Unfortunately, for this passage the Hebrew is not preserved. Sir 17:2-8 (2) ἡμέρας ἀριθμοῦ καὶ καιρὸν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τῶν ἐπ᾽ αὐτῆς (3) καθ᾽ ἑαυτὸν ἐνέδυσεν αὐτοὺς ἰσχὺν καὶ κατ᾽ εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς (4) ἔθηκεν τὸν φόβον αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ πάσης σαρκὸς καὶ κατακυριεύειν θηρίων καὶ πετεινῶν (6) διαβούλιον καὶ γλῶσσαν καὶ ὀφθαλμούς ὦτα καὶ καρδίαν ἔδωκεν διανοεῖσθαι αὐτοῖς (7) ἐπιστήμην συνέσεως ἐνέπλησεν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀγαθὰ καὶ κακὰ ὑπέδειξεν αὐτοῖς (8) ἔθηκεν τὸν ὀφθαλμὸν αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν δεῖξαι αὐτοῖς τὸ μεγαλεῖον τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ.

belonging to the divine order of creation. Thus, in Ben Sira there is no way of linking knowledge with human transgression, which is a possible interpretation when only Genesis 3 is read.[23] This is particularly important because in this instance Ben Sira interprets his supposedly authoritative main source through traditions derived from other sources. However, Ben Sira is not so much creating a new way of interpreting Genesis, but combining the narratives of Genesis with the notions of primordial wisdom he received from Proverbs and Job.

Examination of Ben Sira's interpretation of the Genesis creation accounts also demonstrates that he was concerned not only about the human ability to follow God's Law (15:11-20) but also about the human capacity to know it (16:24-17:14).[24] By arguing that God's Law can be fully known, and that God gave the capacity for such knowledge to humans at creation, Ben Sira might be responding to contemporary claims that some new special revelation was required to have sufficient access to the Law. Ben Sira insists that God's Law is part of the orderly creation of the world and is fully knowable and understandable by humans; there is no flaw in the human abilities or in the Law as given by God that would require some extra act of divine agency beyond creation for humans to comprehend the Law.[25] Thus, every person to whom the Law is given, which in Ben Sira covers the whole people of Israel, is able to understand it and to act in accordance with it. Thus, there is no need for the people to follow specific contemporary teachers proclaiming theirs as the only true understanding of the Law in order for them to be able to observe the covenant with God.[26] The striking difference between Genesis 3 and the book of Ben Sira in connection with wisdom is that in the context of Genesis 3 gaining knowledge can be interpreted either as a partly positive or completely negative turn of events. However, in Ben Sira knowledge is a fundamentally positive attribute and an essential part of human life that has been available from the creation, which means the ambiguity of Genesis is firmly resolved.[27] This capacity of humans to follow the Law is important

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[23] Gilbert, "Reader of Genesis 1-11," pp. 91-93, emphasizes that Sir 15:11-18:14 universalizes the meaning of the accounts of Creation in Genesis. Where Genesis 1-3 spoke of the first man and first woman, for Ben Sira, the same is true for every man and woman.

[24] Cf. Berg, "Ben Sira," p. 145.

[25] For the general portioning of wisdom to all of humanity and another special revelation meant only for the elect people, see Goering, *Wisdom's Root Revealed*, pp. 21-24. See also M. Marttila and M.S. Pajunen, "Wisdom, Israel and Other Nations: Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible, Deuterocanonical Literature, and the Dead Sea Scrolls," *JAJ* 4 (2013), pp. 11-12; Berg, "Ben Sira," pp. 140, 150-151. For the use of creation traditions in Sir 16:26-17:14, and the transition from creation to the events at Sinai, see, for example, A. Wénin, "De la création à l'alliance sinaïtique. La logique de Si 16,26-17,14," in N. Calduch-Benages - J. Vermeylen (eds.), *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Ben Sira and the Book of Wisdom. Festschrift M. Gilbert* (BETL 143; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), pp. 147-158.

[26] For the possibility that Ben Sira might be responding to contemporary views about the need for special revelation, see, e.g., A. Voitila, "Is Ben Sira Opposing Apocalyptic Teaching in Sir 3:21-24?," *ZAW* 122 (2010), pp. 234-248.

[27] Cf. Berg, "Ben Sira," pp. 148-149.

to Ben Sira because it also means that humans are given free will to decide whether they will in fact follow the Law or not. Thus, Ben Sira's discussion of wisdom and humanity is also a part of his engagement in a theological debate of his day concerning free will and predestination.[28]

3. *Humanity and Mortality*

Another remarkable combination of themes in Ben Sira is the pairing of creation and mortality.[29] Sir 17:1-2[30] combines elements from Genesis 2, 3, and 6, with references to humans as creatures made from the earth who will return to the soil as dust after death (cf. Job, Psalms, and Qohelet).[31] By emphasizing the creation from and returning to the dust of the earth Ben Sira assures his audience that all humans are created as mortal creatures:[32] as they were created from the dust, so shall they return to it when they die. Also from the creation onwards the number of days for each human has been set from birth (cf. Isa 65:20, Job 14:1-2, Ps 90:10). What is remarkable here is that Ben Sira specifically connects the aspect of human mortality with the creation. In doing so, Ben Sira again combines elements found separated in the narratives of the early chapters of Genesis as well as in Psalms and Wisdom literature.

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[28] See also A. Lange, *Weisheit und Prädestination: Weisheitliche Urordnung und Prädestination in den Textfunden von Qumran* (STDJ 18; Leiden: Brill, 1995); M. Broshi, "Predestination in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls," in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community* (vol. 2; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 239-240; Berg, "Ben Sira," pp. 139-157.

[29] For a discussion on whether the Genesis passages really indicate that humans were created immortal and how the ideas in Genesis were understood by later interpreters, see K. Schmid, "Loss of Immortality? Hermeneutical Aspects of Genesis 2-3 and Its Early Receptions," in K. Schmid - C. Riedweg (eds.), *Beyond Eden: The Biblical Story of Paradise (Genesis 2-3) and Its Reception History* (FAT 2.34; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 58–78.

[30] Sir 17:1a: κύριος ἔκτισεν ἐκ γῆς ἄνθρωπον; Gen 2:7a: καὶ ἔπλασεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον χοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς. There is no reference to the creation of the human from the earth in the creation account in Gen 1. Sir 17:1b: καὶ πάλιν ἀπέστρεψεν αὐτὸν εἰς αὐτήν; Gen 3:19: ἐν ἱδρῶτι τοῦ προσώπου σου φάγῃ τὸν ἄρτον σου ἕως τοῦ ἀποστρέψαι σε εἰς τὴν γῆν, ἐξ ἧς ἐλήμφθης· ὅτι γῆ εἶ καὶ εἰς γῆν ἀπελεύσῃ. In the reference to the return to the earth by humans, Ben Sira has made transitive, with God as the acting subject, what is intransitive, with the human as the subject, in Gen 3:19 (Ben Sira: "he [God] returns him [the human] to the earth"; Gen 3:19: "until you [the human] return to the earth"). The author is perhaps influenced here particularly by Ps 90:3 ("You return humans to dust") or Job 10:9 ("You made me like clay and you will return me to the soil"). Cf. Berg, "Ben Sira," pp. 146-148.

[31] References to humans as creatures made from earth who will return to the soil or dust can be found in Pss 90:3, 103:14; Job 10:9, 34:15; and Qoh 3:20, 12:7. Job 34:15 "all flesh would perish together, and all mortals return to dust." Ps 90:3 "You turn us (humanity) back to dust, and say, 'Turn back, you mortals,'" and 103:14 "For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust." Qoh 3:20 "All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again," and 12:7 "and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath/spirit returns to God who gave it."

[32] Cf. Berg, "Ben Sira," pp. 146-148.

By placing the creation and mortality together, Ben Sira stresses that no one – not even the first humans – were created immortal and, moreover, that death is not a punishment for human actions (contra Gen 3:19).[33] Here Ben Sira does not follow the creation traditions in Genesis 1-3 but rather goes against them. The quite widespread references to humanity as created from the earth and returning to it found in different earlier traditions again imply that the formulations of these themes in Ben Sira were not strictly his own innovations. Rather, they were once more something he arrived to as a consequence of reading different sources and combining ideas present in them with philosophical concepts and approaches of his particular time that are attested in other literature of the same general time period. This usage of earlier traditions again strengthens the argument that Ben Sira did not initiate these traditions. Ben Sira knew the earlier interpretations and stressed in his own work the point that returning to the dust of the earth was something that should be seen as part of the divine created order.

It is significant that all the different Ben Sira passages that make use of creation traditions and imagery also mention the mortality of humanity (Sir 15:17, 17:1-2, 33:10-15, 40:11, 41:3-4). However, not all of these passages talk about physical death but instead use mortality as a metaphor for a life that is lived wickedly rather than piously; for instance, according to Sir 15:17 humanity has in front of them both life and death and they will get the one they desire (Heb.) or choose (Gr.).[34] Here the text is not talking about concrete life and death. Instead, these two opposite possibilities should be understood as metaphors for godly and ungodly life, which is the traditional choice of the two pathways presented in wisdom literature that would ultimately lead to a blessed life or an ignoble death.

Another example of such usage is located in Sir 33:10-15 where the author presents a metaphor of humanity as clay and God as a potter who forms the clay into whatever he wishes (cf. Isa 29:16, 45:9, 64:7; Jer 18:3-6). Ben Sira sees God as the creator who sustains life and who is in all ways superior to humanity.[35] Even though humanity is created mortal, a fragile clay vessel, there is no reason to be uneasy because God will do as is meant to be done.

There are three other references to human mortality in Ben Sira 17, 40, and 41 that deal with concrete physical death instead of using more metaphoric imagery. First, in Sir 17:1-2, mentioned above, the mortality of humans is explicitly connected with the creation of humanity. Second, in Sir 40:11 there are remarkable variants in the Hebrew and Greek texts. The beginning of Sir

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[33] Sir 25:24 is an exception to this as it claims that death is due to a woman. However, this passage forms an obvious anomaly in Ben Sira as argued, for instance, by J. Collins, "Before the Fall: The Earliest Interpretations of Adam and Eve," in H. Najman - J. Newman (eds.), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (JSJSup 83; Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 296-301; Schmid, "Loss of Immortality?," pp. 66-67.

[34] Sir 15:17 (MS B, 11 verso, line 2) לפני אדם חיים ומות וכל שיחפץ יתן לו; Sir 15:17 ἔναντι ἀνθρώπων ἡ ζωὴ καὶ ὁ θάνατος καὶ ὃ ἐὰν εὐδοκήσῃ δοθήσεται αὐτῷ.

[35] Gilbert, "Ben Sira," p. 95, explains the use of Gen 2:7 in Sir 33:10 as a universalizing of the Genesis account to include every man and woman.

40:11 is the same in both versions and reads "Everything that is from the dust of the earth shall return to the dust of the earth." After this the Hebrew and Greek texts diverge. The Hebrew form reads "Everything from the high shall return to the high," whereas the Greek reads "Everything from the waters shall return to the sea."[36] The Hebrew text preserves the idea that after death, the body returns to the earth from which it was formed,[37] and the spirit shall likewise return to its origin "to the high", that is to God.[38] The Greek text is probably corrupt at this point and hence uses another metaphor not applicable to humanity. Finally, in Sir 41:3-4 death is discussed as something decreed to every creature of flesh, including humans, and used as an argument to encourage people to embrace the Law of God. Thus, it is clear that for Ben Sira death is a natural part of life decreed by God from the very creation.

4. *Conclusions*

If all the descriptions of humanity are collected from the different parts of the book, for Ben Sira God creates humanity from the earth in his image. The human is from creation a mortal creature that has a set number of days, but he also has dominion over the rest of creation, and is imbued with knowledge and thus has the basic capacity to understand and act according to the Law. These characteristics of humans form the basis for Ben Sira's understanding of what it is to be a human being. It is closely related to the general human condition, and to what is expected of humanity and why.

In order to form his portrait of humanity, Ben Sira combines elements and imagery found in Genesis, Isaiah, Job, Proverbs, Psalms, and Qohelet with the ideas and concepts of the soul and knowledge gathered from Hellenistic philosophical traditions. He does not concentrate on describing the creation itself in detail, but is instead interested in answering questions typical of wisdom literature, such as what kind of creature the human being is, and what it means to be a human in the world God created. His main concerns are found in themes particularly prominent in the contemporary wisdom discourse, such as the possessing of Wisdom and the question of free will. All in all, Ben Sira relates a fairly positive image of human life where every human is imbued with access to knowledge and wisdom. Through these attributes humans are able to understand and obey the will of God. Furthermore, there is no original sin in Ben Sira, and mortality is not seen as a divine punishment.

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[36] Sir 40:11 (MS B, 10 recto, line 3) כל מארץ אל ארץ ישוב ואשר ממרום אל מרום; Sir 40:11 πάντα ὅσα ἀπὸ γῆς εἰς γῆν ἀναστρέφει καὶ ἀπὸ ὑδάτων εἰς θάλασσαν ἀνακάμπτει. Cf. Gen 3:19; Qoh 3:20, 12:7; Job 34:15.

[37] Sir 41:10 uses similar metaphors of returning to one's origins when speaking about the ways of the impious.

[38] H. Spieckermann, "Is God's Creation Good? From Hesiodus to Ben Sira," in K. Schmid - C. Riedweg (eds.), *Beyond Eden: The Biblical Story of Paradise (Genesis 2-3) and Its Reception History* (FAT 2.34; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), p. 91 connects the phrasing in Hebrew Sir 40:11 closely with Qoh 3:21 and as a possible reaction to it.

Indeed, from the very beginning God intended that humanity would live only for a limited time. Because according to Ben Sira's understanding humanity was created in the image of God and given knowledge already in the beginning, it is of paramount importance to stress the utterly different natures of God and humanity: God is eternal, but humanity was created mortal.

The general themes discussed here are clear examples of the frequent stylistic use of opposing polarities, such as life-death, good-evil, righteous-wicked, which are present throughout Ben Sira's reading and interpreting of the earlier traditions' understanding of humanity as part of the creation, and therefore a natural part of his anthropology and theology as well.[39] The combining of earlier sources into a new whole is a style by no means unique to Ben Sira, but instead quite widely represented in other contemporary works (e.g., *Jubilees*, 4Q*Non-Canonical Psalms B*, and the *Temple Scroll*). So should Ben Sira be considered as an innovative scribe when it comes to transmitting and reinterpreting the creation traditions or is he merely repeating ideas already formulated before him? As has been argued here, he makes some inventive combinations of themes, but does not create his ideas out of thin air, and in doing so he is acting in a manner similar to other Jewish sages from the same general time period (e.g., *Instruction* and 4Q525). This does not mean that Ben Sira should not be considered a wise and creative author, only that he should not be considered as something unique in this respect. He is rather to be regarded as a typical representative of the wise sages active in the Jewish society of this period.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the use and interpretation of a particular earlier tradition in Ben Sira: creation of humanity, focusing on Genesis 1-3 and other material currently in the Hebrew Bible. The author argues that the allusive handling of these traditions in Ben Sira represents a combination of traditions that is partly a distillation of pre-existing ways of interpretation. Ben Sira thus acts similarly as other innovative scribes of the late Second Temple period in the way he utilizes prior traditions.

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[39] For Ben Sira's use of polarities and their possible place in the structuring of the whole Creation, see R.A. Argall, *1 Enoch and Sirach: A Comparative Literary and Conceptual Analysis of the Themes of Revelation, Creation and Judgment* (SBLEJL 8; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 135-136; J. Marböck, *Weisheit im Wandel: Untersuchungen zur Weisheitstheologie bei Ben Sira. Mit Nachtwort und Bibliographie zur Neueauflage* (BZAW 272; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), pp. 152-153.